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## **FOREWORD**

A major purpose of the accreditation process is to stimulate inservice growth and school improvement. Consequently, requirements include not only meeting the standards of the Utah State Office of Education, but also completing a school evaluation every six years.

School evaluation is that effort by the local school staff to take a comprehensive look at the school's program, operation and effect. The school determines how closely its purposes and philosophy coincide with its actual practices and the degree to which its stated objectives are being reached. It is a three-phased program: (1) self-evaluation, (2) on-site evaluation by an external team of educators and (3) implementation using units of the evaluation to improve the school by effecting thoughtful change.

The evaluation, March 29 and 30, 2003, was conducted because of the school's desire to ensure quality education for all students in the school, and to meet the requirements referred to above.

The entire staff of Vernal Junior High School is commended for the time and effort devoted to studying and evaluating the various facets of the total program and to preparing the materials used by the Visiting Team. The excellent leadership given by Principal Kent Bunderson is commended.

The staff and administration are congratulated for the generally fine program being provided for Vernal Junior High School students, and also for the professional attitude of all members of the group, which made it possible for them to see areas of weakness and strength and to suggest procedures for bringing about improvements.

While these recommendations may be used to solicit financial support to acquire some of the materials, equipment, and services needed to carry out a more effective program, it is even more important that the faculty and administration utilize them as they continue to evaluate and modify course offerings and administrative and classroom procedures to more adequately meet the needs of the students of Vernal Junior High School.

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*12/20/2002*

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## VERNAL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

### ADMINISTRATION AND STAFF

#### School Administration

Kent Bunderson ..... Principal  
John Anderson ..... Assistant Principal

#### Counseling

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Peggy Tolman ..... Counselor

#### Support Staff

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Brenda Hannah ..... Front Office/ Finance  
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Helen Coon ..... Special Ed Aide  
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Visiting Team Chair

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Terry Jackson, Box Elder Middle School, Box Elder School District

Jim Stocks, Monticello High School, San Juan School District

Dr. Susan Brady, Central High School, Granite School District

Tom Brown, Grand County High School, Grand County School District

Sue Anderson, Grand County High School, Grand County School District

**VISITING TEAM REPORT**  
**VERNAL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL**

**CHAPTER 1: SCHOOL PROFILE**

- a) *What significant findings were revealed by the school's analysis of their profile?*

The school profile included data such as student Grade Point Average (GPA), results from a variety of tests, community and student demographics, and information regarding student support programs, student discipline, clubs, activities, and associations.

Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) results were available for eighth and ninth grades, and State Core Testing results were available for Spring 2002 and Fall 2001 and 2002. The results for most subjects hovered around the national and state averages, with the exception of some higher math and science scores.

Vernal Junior High School also offers several student support programs. Among these is the Intervention for Student Academic Success Project for “at-risk” students. In interviews with students and teachers participating in the project, beliefs about its effectiveness was mixed. Also offered are remediation classes in earth systems and math, as well as a reading strategies class.

Data for GPA, which was disaggregated as to ethnicity, indicated a significant difference between Caucasian students (2.72 average GPA) and minority students (1.48 average GPA), which includes Hispanic (27 students), Asian (3 students), Black (2 students), Pacific Islander (1 student) and, most predominately, American Indian (53 students).

- b) *What modifications to the school profile should the school consider for the future?*

Vernal Junior High School should continue in its efforts to collect and analyze data to guide the school improvement process. Test data and demographics for students should be more disaggregated by gender, grade level, ethnicity, content, etc. Also, test scores for years prior to 2001 should be considered in the improvement process.



### **Suggested Areas for Further Inquiry:**

- Gather, disaggregate, and analyze SAT and Core test data for previous years, as much as possible. The Utah State Office of Education offers access to the COGNOS program, which should have this information available.
- Develop survey questionnaires specific to the needs of the school. Interviews with members of the administration and those involved in the survey indicated that contradictory information made analysis of the questionnaire difficult.
- Additional data regarding grades, attendance, and discipline patterns might be helpful in guiding the improvement process in the future.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE SELF-STUDY PROCESS**

- a) *To what extent has the school community engaged in a collaborative self-study process on behalf of students?*

It is evident that the collaborative self-study process at Vernal Junior High School was taken very seriously and that the administration, faculty, and other stakeholders worked diligently to facilitate the process. The Visiting Team recognizes that the school and leadership team have made a sincere effort to do a thorough analysis of the school's strengths and limitations, and commends them for this effort.

Despite these efforts, the Visiting Team found evidence that the school did not complete the self-study process to the extent expected. One of the major components missing from the process was the use of focus groups in determining instructional and organizational effectiveness. Another component was the lack of data in the school profile.

A result of these missing components is that the action plan does not appear to be well aligned with the data and evidence from the profile and focus group reports.

Interviews with staff, students, and others indicate that many stakeholders do not completely understand the self-study process, and how the DRSLs and action plan will drive the efforts of the school in the future. All stakeholders need to understand the process and endorse the improvement plan.

- b) *To what extent does the school's self-study accurately reflect the school's current strengths and limitations?*

The school's strengths and limitations are, for the most part, detailed in the results of the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) survey. Although this does provide basic information, the Visiting Team found many more strengths that the school should be proud of, including a high level of collegiality, innovative and effective instructional practices, and a passion for educating students. These strengths should be recognized in the self-study and used in planning for the future. Of course, the school should be honest with itself in recognizing limitations and also use that information in its self-study process.

- c) *To what extent has the school defined a set of beliefs that reflect the commitment of the administration and staff to support student achievement and success?*

Vernal Junior High School's belief statements are thoughtful and well-intentioned. It is apparent, however, that more effort must be expended in translating the beliefs into finding more assessment tools. The majority of the belief statements relate to affective areas rather than describing student learning. It is the Visiting Team's recommendation that faculty and staff work to further align learning and beliefs to maximize student learning.

- d) *To what extent do the school's mission and beliefs align to support the school's desired results for student learning (DRSLs)?*

The Visiting Team applauds the efforts of Vernal Junior High in targeting reading as a focus for student achievement. It is recommended that stakeholders revisit their departmental DRSLs to (1) refine the DRSLs to reflect the school's mission and belief statements, and (2) to define measurable goals to monitor achievement of DRSLs.

It is also suggested that effort be made to expand the school's DRSLs to better encompass students' exiting competencies and provide a broader base for school improvement and focus.

### **CHAPTER 3: INSTRUCTIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS**

Vernal Junior High School's desired result for student learning is as follows:

**Students read and comprehend at or above grade level.**

### **Shared Vision, Beliefs, Mission, and Goals:**

- a) *To what extent did the school facilitate a collaborative process to build a shared vision for the school (mission) that defines a compelling purpose and direction for the school?*

There is evidence that the administration and leadership team developed the school's mission statement. Inherent problems included frequent administrative changes, but faculty stakeholders facilitated the process during this pivotal year. There is evidence that much collaborative work has been done by tenured faculty and staff. However, more efforts need to be expended in aligning the mission with day-to-day practice.

### **Curriculum Development:**

- a) *To what extent does the staff work collaboratively to ensure the curriculum is based on clearly defined standards and the Utah Core Curriculum (with inclusion of the Utah Life Skills)?*

The staff at Vernal Junior High School shows a great understanding of the Utah Core Curriculum. There is evidence that departments have had discussions about the Core and the essential knowledge and skills in their content areas. These have been given priority in the development of curricula. Greater collaboration has developed from these informal discussions among teachers. It revolves around the interest and style of those teachers involved. Formal plans should be established to facilitate greater collaboration across the curriculum. The priority to get all students on grade level in reading is an ambitious and worthwhile goal. The exact steps have not been finalized and the essential knowledge is still being identified. The school needs to make sure all stakeholders are kept informed so that the home, school, and community partnership can be strengthened.

- b) *To what extent does the teaching staff works collaboratively to support the development of a curriculum that focuses on the school's desired results for student learning?*

Vernal Junior High School has a clear focus on what it is trying to accomplish. The staff and departments are focused on helping all students improve reading ability and making sure their individual curricula address reading strategies. The strategies are still being identified and refined by key players on staff. It is evident that they have administrative support with this work. Creating Independence Through Student-Owned Strategies (CRISS) training was delivered to the majority of staff members at the first of the year, and reading strategies are presented to the entire staff at faculty meetings. It will be critical to continue articulation among the teaching strategies and learning activities that the school is using to accomplish the reading goal. The Visiting Team would recommend that

benchmarks be set along the way so the school can celebrate the successes that occur, which will help keep all stakeholders excited and focused on student achievement. Priority has been established for the limited resources available to a school—time and money. The school should make sure student reading performance is enhanced for the diverse population it serves. The Visiting Team recommends that the stakeholders focus on curriculum issues.

### **Quality Instructional Design:**

- a) *To what extent does the professional staff design and implement a variety of learning experiences that actively engage students?*

During the two-day visit the following instructional strategies were observed: direct instruction, teachers giving tests, students reading texts, small group work, the use of technology (PowerPoint presentations), interviews, group discussion, and students doing worksheets. The Visiting Team would recommend an analysis of various teaching methods now incorporated by the staff, and expansion of the use of multiple teaching strategies to meet the needs of all students. Students did state that teachers had the habit of using the same method consistently in their classes.

- b) *To what extent does the professional staff employ a variety of instructional strategies to ensure the needs of different learners are met?*

The Resource Department incorporated an inclusionary model where its students were mainstreamed into the regular classrooms for some part of the day. The resource teachers then followed up on these students in a study skills class to track schoolwork from other classes. Success Skills classes showed a step between the regular classroom and a referral to special education. There is evidence that the students in this class are making a positive difference in their academic performance. The Visiting Team recommends that stakeholders continue to take a close look at instructional design to enhance student achievement.

- c) *To what extent do the professional staff and leadership provide additional opportunities which support student learning?*

There are a variety of programs to support student learning in addition to the regular classroom. These include Johnson O'Malley, the Youth in Custody—Assets Program, Earth Systems Science Remediation, Reading Classes, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Math, and Character Education. The staff is encouraged to study the effectiveness of these programs in meeting the students' needs.

### **Leadership for School Improvement:**

- a) *To what extent does the school leadership promote quality instruction by fostering an academic learning climate and actively supporting teaching and learning?*

The leadership of Vernal Junior High School is new this year. Some of the teaching staff has assumed leadership roles by organizing and delivering professional development opportunities. For example, reading strategies are shared at faculty meetings, as was CRISS training. The leadership for the self-study was largely composed of faculty members prior to the arrival of the new administrative team.

Some efforts at mentorship of new teachers are evident, and the faculty appears to be open and straightforward about perceived strengths and weaknesses. The staff and faculty overwhelmingly state a need for longer tenure for principals.

Both informal and formal leadership face a large challenge to further involve patrons, students, and community in the school's action plan and implementation of the recommendations of the Visiting Team. The absence of parental input was glaring.

- b) *To what extent does the school leadership employ effective decision-making that is data-driven, research-based, and collaborative?*

The Visiting Team believes that there is little evidence of hard data to drive decision-making, and that much more effort must be expended to employ data-driven, research-based decision making. Currently, the school's lack of sufficient data impedes its efforts toward accountability and effectiveness. Part of the gap appears to be caused by incomplete district information and lag time in receiving results. This, coupled with the lack of assessment instruments for reading, is problematic and makes it difficult to monitor school improvement efforts.

Although a sincere effort was made to involve both students and parents, the need for more focus groups and community input was evident. The collected data did reveal some areas to be addressed, but was limited in scope and did not provide adequate information regarding school and classroom practices. It is suggested that the school leadership (1) listen to input from faculty and focus groups regarding such items as discipline and climate that already have "buy in," and (2) study the NSSE rubrics on best practices, which would provide a common focus and language for future improvement.

- c) *To what extent does the school leadership monitor progress in student achievement and instructional effectiveness through a comprehensive assessment system and continuous reflection?*

The leadership of Vernal Junior High School has not yet identified a comprehensive assessment system. They do utilize the SAT, Core, and the Student Taking Academic Responsibility (STAR) system (for reading and math). Budgetary constraints appear to be impeding the process of accountability and direction. This system should be a major focus before the next site visit.

- d) *To what extent does the school leadership provide skillful stewardship by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment?*

There appears to be some dissatisfaction surrounding disciplinary methods at Vernal Junior High School. Numerous faculty members commented on “liking” the leadership, but stating that discipline and consequences needed more focus. There were numerous positive expressions that the CHOICES disciplinary system used by past administrators should be reinstated.

- e) *To what extent does the school leadership make decisions related to the allocation and use of resources which align with the school goals, the achievement of the DRSLs, and school improvement efforts?*

It is felt that the administration wants to align resources with school goals. However, budgetary constraints (the imminent loss of six staff members, lack of funding for In School Suspension [ISS], costly testing systems, etc.) keep this alignment from becoming a reality.

- f) *To what extent does the school leadership empower the school community and encourage commitment, participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility for student learning?*

Many innovative school and community interventions are evident. Teachers are empowered to make connections across curricular areas, between departments, and between businesses and students. The administration encourages this participation and collaboration. While the Visiting Team was on site, numerous businesses were conducting mock interviews with students.

### **Community Building:**

- a) *To what extent does the school foster community building and working relationships within the school?*

The use of Community Councils is viewed by the administration and some staff members as a way to get input and involvement from parents. Using the council as the steering committee on comprehensive guidance and the spending of funds relieves staff members of some divisive decisions. The accreditation process itself is generally seen as a positive process that has bridged communication gaps

from previous years. Regular department meetings designed to further reading improvement are a unifying force.

- b) *To what extent does the school extend the school community through collaborative networks that support student learning?*

Faculty meetings are used for inservice training by the reading specialist in order to give teachers strategies to use across the curriculum. The accreditation process has led the staff to hold more inter- and intra-departmental meetings where they plan collaborative lessons with each other. Two days of training in the summer, and one day of training since school began, were used for mind mapping and tying reading strategies to each department.

### **Culture of Continuous Improvement and Learning:**

- a) *To what extent does the school build skills and the capacity for improvement through comprehensive and ongoing professional development programs focused on the school's goals for improvement?*

Faculty meetings are now used as inservice training sessions for teachers. The reading specialist has developed multiple resources and lessons for teachers to use that extend the strategies she teaches. The accreditation process itself has led to more inter- and intra-departmental meetings, where reading can be incorporated into the curriculum.

- b) *To what extent does the school create conditions that support productive change and continuous improvement?*

Two days were allotted during the summer of 2002 for training in reading strategies. One day has been used since school began for the 2002-2003 school year to train teachers in mind-mapping and other strategies designed to tie departments together in their goals for incorporating reading into cross-curricular plans.

## **CHAPTER 4: NORTHWEST ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (NASCU) STANDARDS I-X**

Middle and junior high schools are not accredited by the NASCU; therefore, these standards are not applicable.

## CHAPTER 5: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS – ACTION PLAN

- a) *To what extent is the schoolwide action plan adequate in addressing the critical areas for follow-up?*

Vernal Junior High's action plan addresses the DRSL of having students read at or above grade level. In order to achieve this goal the staff has committed itself to the following plan: (1) All staff members were trained in CRISS. This was a two-day training with a one-day follow-up. (2) The reading specialist will provide one reading strategy per month for use by staff. (3) Teachers will be able to attend reading conferences to increase their knowledge of reading strategies and share their knowledge with the rest of the staff. A resource book for reading strategies is also available for teachers to peruse.

The Visiting Team feels that the school needs to address critical needs identified in its school profile in closer conjunction with its reading DRSL.

- b) *To what extent is there sufficient commitment to the action plan, schoolwide and systemwide?*

All departments have written action plans to address the DRSL in each of their classes. The Visiting Team has observed that the leadership supports the faculty in their efforts to promote reading. Additionally, there is widespread evidence that the faculty is involved with promoting reading throughout the entire community.

- c) *How sound does the follow-up process that the school intends to use for monitoring the accomplishments of the schoolwide action plan appear to be?*

The Visiting Team has some concerns about the monitoring and effectiveness of the school's action plan. Though reading is a measurable goal, the school's DRSL of raising all students to read at grade level or above is difficult to measure without research-based data.

The Visiting Team would recommend that alternative assessment tools be looked into, to better assess student reading level and measure gains that are made. The school improvement plan is limited, and with more time spent on focus group findings the Visiting Team feels the school can implement more DRSLs to address critical needs for school improvement.

Two days were allotted during the summer of 2002 for training in reading strategies. One day, on which when teachers were trained in mind-mapping and other strategies designed to tie departments together in their goals for incorporating reading into cross-curricular plans, has been used since the beginning of the 2002-2003 school year.



## **CHAPTER 6: MAJOR COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE VISITING TEAM**

### **Commendations:**

- The staff, parents, students, and administration of Vernal Junior High School are to be commended for their sincere efforts in using the NSSE tool to obtain opinions and data about Vernal Junior High School. The staff worked diligently to provide opportunities for parents and students to provide input. The efforts need to continue as Vernal Junior High School moves forward with its school improvement plan.
- The staff is to be commended for maintaining stability, patience, and a directed focus through continual administrative changes and philosophies, severe budget and program cuts, and planning stages for an upcoming major renovation to the physical building. New faculty members have been assimilated into the school improvement goals and accreditation process and appear to have been united as a cohesive part of a cooperative faculty.
- The faculty and each curricular department are to be commended for a focused effort and commitment toward achieving the single DRSL of having students read and comprehend at or above grade level.

### **Recommendations:**

- The Visiting Team recommends that Vernal Junior High School identify and use authentic assessment data that will accurately assess student achievement of the current DRSL. Assessment data will also play an important role in the continued development of DRSLs and departmental action plans for improving student achievement.
- The Visiting Team recommends that Vernal Junior High School broaden the scope of their DRSLs to encompass, identify, and reinforce the true level of learning that is occurring at the school. The school should identify and develop a method to assess communication and critical thinking skills will help to increase the understanding and the purpose of the school's DRSL and goals to improve student achievement.
- The Visiting Team recommends that Vernal Junior High School continue to address some of the issues and concerns that were identified using the NSSE and the concerns that were brought forth from the Visiting Team's meeting with teachers and students. These concerns can be addressed through continued work with focus groups and departments. A common concern of teachers and students centered on the school's climate and discipline policies.